TRAVELING SOLICITORS

By Skip Shervington

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Each year, law enforcement agencies receive a fair number of complaints from citizens regarding door-to-door solicitors. Most of the time, the complaints allege that the solicitor was not permitted by the city, rude, pushy, or lying about being the son or daughter of someone in the neighborhood. I recall one incident several years ago where the solicitor forced his way into the foyer and refused to leave. The resident and the solicitor fought and after being forced outside by the victim, the solicitor punched his fist through the window on the front door. Fortunately, units were quick to apprehend him as he was trying to flee the neighborhood.

What most people don't realize is that many of the solicitors are from out-of state, traveling in groups and living in motels along the way. Some are looking for a new life or a little adventure, and yet others are escaping commitments or non-extraditable criminal warrants from their home state.

In extreme cases, these aimless teens and young adults can become victims themselves of robbery, rape, and assault. Sometimes, they become the criminal and end up committing some of the more serious criminal acts, such as burglary, robbery, or assault. In any case, these traveling solicitors and many of the companies that operate them are not easily regulated and ripe for corruption and conflict.

I have personally talked with a few of these traveling solicitors over the years as a patrol deputy. I recall one story told to me by a solicitor after I stopped him going door-to-door in a neighborhood. He told me that he was one of the top salesmen in his group and that he would soon be promoted to "crew boss" and given his own team of solicitors to manage. He said he wanted to be a good crew boss and not a *bad one* like so many of the others he had worked for in the past. I asked him what made up a "bad" crew boss. He said that I first had to understand what the job of a boss entails.

Crew bosses tally up the sales for the evening and keep track of individual performance. They are also expected to motivate the sales team as well as discipline them and keep them on schedule. The boss drives the van and picks the neighborhoods that the groups will work each day. He drops everyone off in the morning and picks them up at a predetermined location in the evening. He makes all the hotel arrangements and acts as the paymaster. He also has the ability to hire and fire on the spot. Everyone's compensation is directly tied to sales commission, even the crew bosses'. The crew boss is expected to keep sales within performance targets or risk being demoted or fired.

The young man I was talking to told me that many of the crew bosses will do "almost anything" to keep their assignment and not have to go back to selling door-to-door. They make lower producing solicitors sleep outside as punishment, withhold per diem, or suggest that they return in the evening with stolen merchandise from homes and automobiles. In some cases, they sell the stolen property and use the money to boost their sales figures by creating false sales. Then they either keep any leftover money or share it with some or all of the rest of the team. Sometimes they just divide up the property and many of the solicitors will mail the stolen property back home so they are not caught with it. He also said that female solicitors are an especially rare sight on sales teams and that they are often expected or coerced into to performing sexual acts in exchange for sales receipts or protection.

This young man aspired to be something better than those who had mentored him (so he *sold* me) and he certainly did have a gift for being personable. I sincerely hope that he found a way into his organization where he could create some serious and positive change.

Other problems law enforcement agencies have seen as a result of door-to-door solicitation include:

- Checks written for subscriptions were later altered (washed) and cashed for larger amounts
- Checks have been duplicated and then forged for unauthorized amounts
- Cash has been stolen and no subscription was ever received
- Solicitors have arrest warrants for burglary and theft from other states that are non-extraditable and therefore law enforcement cannot arrest them for the warrant
- Criminal citations are not a deterrent. Solicitors, who are caught, cited and then released for not having the proper permit rarely show up in court to answer the charges. They will be long-gone onto the next city or state by the time their day in court arrives

WHAT SHOULD YOU DO?

Solicitors will always claim ignorance of the law that requires them to obtain a permit from each city they operate in. Since each city requires a fee, it becomes cost prohibitive for them to obtain a permit especially in the bay area where there are so many small cities close together. Sometimes, they will say that "their company" has obtained a permit and that its "on-file" when in fact solicitation permits are only issued to each person doing the soliciting and they must be carried and displayed while going door-to-door. By issuing solicitation permits, the city will be able to respond to complaints of rude or illegal behavior by simply revoking the offending parties permit. Moreover, those that perpetrate illegal activity are more easily identified.

In most cases, the only people exempted from the permit requirement are those who are working for Not for Profit organizations and those that are not selling anything, such as religious organizations and campaign workers. Keep that in mind the next time your neighbor knocks on your door and wants you to buy Girl Scout cookies, vote him or her in as Mayor, or convert!

Do not entertain non-permitted for-profit solicitors and report them by calling your local non-emergency number. Have a good description of them and a direction of travel ready for the call taker. Most importantly, never pretend like no one is home. On the contrary, if you do not want to answer the door, turn up the television, radio, or fire up the vacuum cleaner. If you are inclined to speak to them, a simple shout of "No thank you" and "Have a nice day" should be enough to send them on their way to the next house where they will likely pretend that they just had a wonderful chat and a spot of tea with their neighbor Mr. or Mrs. (*Insert the name on your mailbox here*)!

MORE INFORMATION

Personal Story: **Selling Myself—Life on a Magazine Crew**
YO! Youth Outlook Media, Commentary, Eric Zeiszler, Posted: Apr 10, 2007
http://news.ncmonline.com/news/view_article.html?article_id=863ee0792a3d8d898c27f494041129d4

For more information search the web: Traveling Sales Crews; Traveling Magazine Sales Crews; Traveling Solicitors